

MISCELLANEOUS NOTES

1. THE DESERT CAT *FELIS LYBICA* IN PANNA NATIONAL PARK

I saw a desert cat in Panna National Park on the evening of October 25, 1997. It was near the southeastern corner of the Park, about 500 m west of Rampura barrier. When I first saw it from about 50 m, it was crouching by the side of the road, probably stalking the jungle bush quails that were dust bathing close by. When I approached it on my motorcycle, it stood up on its longish legs, swiftly climbed the rubble boundary wall and jumped on to the other side. I stopped the motorcycle, turned the engine off and rolled it back. The cat froze, and watched me passing by. It was about the size of an adult domestic cat, but more slender and with a long tail. It was pale sandy buff overall, cryptically merging with the background terrain. It had slightly elliptical black spots on the flanks and almost all over; two thick black stripes on the elbows; a black ringed tail; black stripe on the cheeks and with small triangular ears. Its tail

length was about two-thirds the size of the body.

Prater (1965) gives the distribution of the desert cat in India as Gujarat, Rajasthan and the arid regions of central India. Its extralimital distribution extends from Africa into middle-east Asia. However, the recent classifications consider *Felis lybica* a subspecies of the widely distributed *Felis sylvestris* (Corbett and Hill 1992). Jerdon (1874) and Brander (1982) write about having collected specimens of this cat from places like Nagpur, Mhow, etc., in central India. However, there are no records as far east as Panna, though the habitat in Panna is quite similar to the western semi-arid parts of central India.

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2. STATUS OF THE WILD WATER BUFFALO *BUBALUS ARNEE* IN LOHIT DISTRICT, ARUNACHAL PRADESH

(With one text-figure)

With the decline of its wild population, and due to its restricted range, the Asiatic wild water buffalo *Bubalus arnee* Kerr is in urgent need of conservation attention. Micro-level information has become extremely important. Here I report its occurrence and present status in the Lohit dist. (27° 35'-28° 28' N, 95° 46'-97° 25' E) of eastern Arunachal Pradesh. Field studies have been

carried out in the area between 1992 and 1994.

Reference to the wild buffalo in this area is found in Cooper (1873), after which no published records were available till Choudhury (1996). However, I documented the status of the species in Dibang Valley dist., which is adjacent to Lohit (Choudhury 1988). An account of its status in northeast India, the only stronghold of

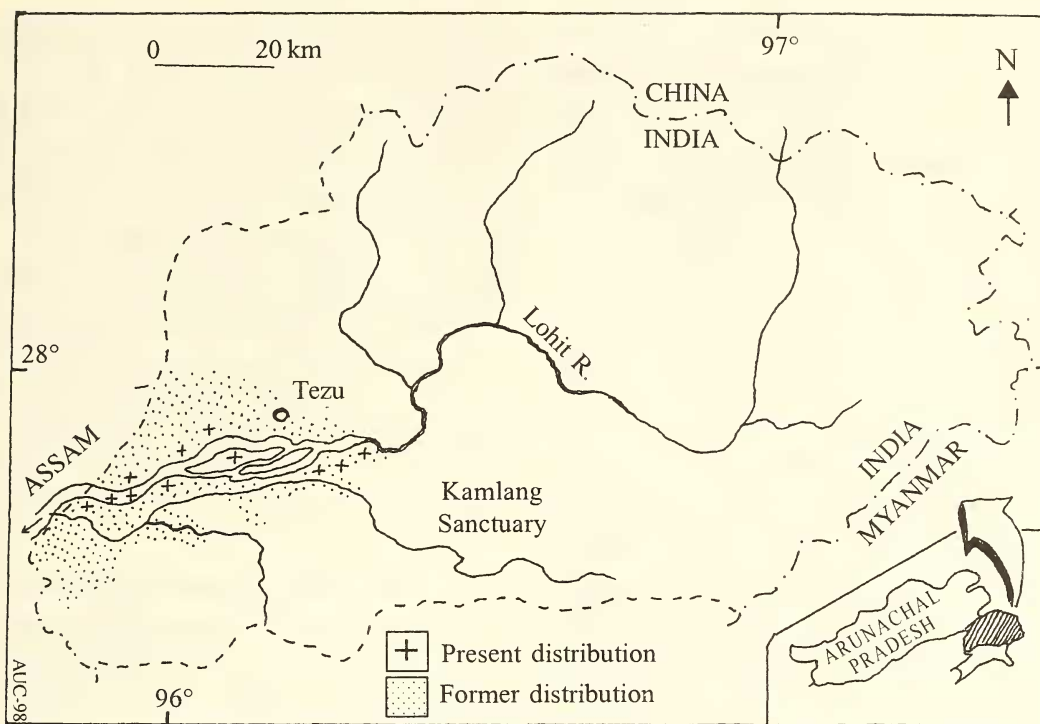


Fig. 1: Distribution of wild buffalo in Lohit district.

the species, was given (Choudhury 1994). Katti *et al.* (1990) mistook horns of domestic animals preserved at Kalai basti in Kamlang Wildlife Sanctuary which were brought for sacrifice, for those of the wild buffalo.

From the habitat type and discussion with old hunters, villagers and forest staff, it seems that the wild buffalo was not uncommon in the riverine tracts of the Lohit river, from Parshuramkund (Brahmakund) where the river debouches onto the plains, to the interstate border with Assam near Sunpura in Sadiya, and then extending inside Assam. The grassy tracts of some of the tributaries of the Lohit, such as Hajjo and Digaru rivers, were also inhabited by the buffalo. The last large herds in the Hajjo river area were seen in the early 1970s.

At present, small and scattered populations occur in the *chapories* (riverine islets and tracts) of the Lohit river, with stray animals in Hajjo

and Digaru *chapories*. In 1986, one bull was shot near the Lohit river, near Wakro after it had killed a Nepali grazier. In the same area, a herd of 20 was seen in 1995 (M. Kashyap, pers. comm.). In September, 1993 a lone bull was encountered by the forest staff in Lai Anchal Reserved Forest (RF). The animals are shy because of fear of hunting. Although they do not occur inside the Kamlang Sanctuary, some animals roam in the northern areas of Kamlang RF.

Estimating the population of such an extremely shy (due to regular persecution) and thinly distributed species is a difficult task. However, after visiting all the known and potential areas and interviewing old hunters and graziers of the *khutis* (cattle camps, mostly run by Nepalis and Biharis), villagers and forest staff, it can be safely said that there are less than 20 animals in Lai Anchal RF and adjacent areas, mostly affecting the grasslands of the Lohit river.

In the grasslands between Wakro and Chowkham, covering parts of Turung, and northwestern areas of Kamlang RF and adjacent grasslands on the banks of the Lohit and Kamlang rivers, some 60 to 90 buffaloes occur. Between Chowkham and Sunpura, covering parts of Lohit, Paya and Digaru RFs including the adjacent unclassified forests, a widely scattered population of 20 to 40 animals occurs. Westwards, it is contiguous with some of the buffalo-bearing areas of Bhim *chapori* of Sadiya in Tinsukia dist. (Assam). The total habitat available for wild buffalo in the district is around 150 sq. km. (Fig. 1).

Expansion of lowland paddy cultivation by the Khamtee tribe in the southern areas of the Lohit river, poaching for meat by the Khamtees, Digaru Mishmi and Miju Mishmi tribals, development of townships at Tezu, Chowkham and Wakro and shifting of many interior villages to the fertile plains have resulted in a gradual decline of the wild buffalo. Moreover, the

presence of domestic buffaloes in the *khutis* is a potential hazard to the small wild population due to the danger of diseases like anthrax, foot-and-mouth and rinderpest. However, domestic males are usually not kept in the *khutis* and hence, contamination of wild stock due to interbreeding is a remote possibility. Domestic animals going feral are also brought back immediately, because they are too valuable to their owner. The feral animals are also shot by the local tribals for food.

Poaching with guns and rifles is taking its toll, and unless conservation measures are taken, the future of these animals in Lohit dist. is bleak. The grassy parts of Kamlang RF, Lai Anchal RF and some adjacent areas (totalling about 30 sq. km) have been recommended as additions to the Kamlang Wildlife Sanctuary.

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3. DAYTIME RESTING IN THE NEST — AN ADAPTATION BY THE INDIAN GIANT SQUIRREL *RATUFA INDICA* TO AVOID PREDATION

Predation may play an important role in influencing social behaviour. In tree squirrels, predation could affect nest tree selection and behavioural strategies. Most studies on temperate and tropical squirrels have documented the importance of diurnal raptors as predators of sciurids. (Emmons 1980, Borges 1989, Joshua 1992).

Predation attempts by the black eagle (*Ictinaetus malayensis perniger*) and crested

serpent eagle (*Spilornis cheela*) on the Indian giant squirrel (*Ratufa indica*) and grizzled giant squirrel (*R. macroura*) have been reported by Borges (1989), Ramachandran (1991), Joshua (1992), and Joshua and Johnsingh (1994). I observed three unsuccessful predation attempts by the crested hawk-eagle (*Spizaetus cirrhatus limnaetus*) on the Indian giant squirrel (*Ratufa indica*) in Bori Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS), Madhya Pradesh (Datta 1993).